Fostering Mental Wellbeing in SMEs in the Czech Republic

How can small/medium sized companies foster a healthy workplace and maintain performance through mental wellbeing initiatives?

June 2025

Mental wellbeing is no longer a luxury, it's a vital driver of business performance. This presentation draws on insights from a comprehensive study involving over 100 professionals, alongside in-depth interviews with HR leaders. We'll explore practical, cost-effective strategies to foster a mentally healthy workplace, enhancing not only employee satisfaction but also overall productivity and organisational culture.

Introduction of the Project & Project Leader

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Mental health in the workplace is no longer just something in the background. It's part of our everyday lives – sometimes in obvious ways, sometimes more quietly.

I started my career in business consulting and later moved into psychotherapy. Along the way, I've seen how issues like stress, motivation, and the search for meaning appear in all kinds of workplaces. The words we use may differ, but the core human needs are surprisingly similar.

However, supporting mental health at work isn't only about dealing with crises. It's about creating an environment where people can think clearly, work sustainably, and feel like their whole selves. Companies don't need to become therapy providers – but they can play an important role by responding with awareness, clarity, and care.

I'm truly grateful to the VŠE Executive MBA team, who looked at this topic with fresh eyes. Their survey gathered insights from the general public and led to practical, thoughtful tools that reflect real-life experiences – not just theory.

Thank you to everyone who is helping bring about this shift – by listening, asking questions, learning, and showing that mental health matters. Your effort makes a real difference!

Meet the Team, Executive MBA students at the Faculty of Business Administration, University of Economics in Prague (VŠE)

Our team consists of experienced professionals with extensive backgrounds in finance, marketing, arts, education, sales, global mobility and customer experience. We aimed to develop a practical, ready-to-implement manual tailored for SMEs, offering effective strategies to enhance employee well-being while sustaining productivity.

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Learn more about the Executive MBA programme

Our Roadmap to Mental Wellbeing

Why Mental Health Matters
Exploring the business case for prioritising employee wellbeing in the context of SMEs

Our Research Approach
How we gathered insights from cross-industry workplaces through surveys and interviews

Mental Health Toolkit
Practical strategies for SMEs to implement effective wellbeing initiatives

Implementation Roadmap
Step-by-step guidance for creating lasting change in your organisation

This presentation provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing mental wellbeing challenges in SMEs, with emphasis on practical, affordable solutions that deliver measurable benefits.

Executive Summary

The Challenge

SMEs in the Czech Republic face significant mental health challenges with nearly 40 % of employees rating workplace mental health support as satisfactory or poor. The COVID pandemic has worsened stress, anxiety and burnout across industries.

Our Approach

Through extensive research including surveys of 100+ professionals and interviews with HR leaders, we have identified key stressors, effective interventions, and implementation barriers specific to the SME business context.

The Solution

Our "Mental Health Toolkit" offers pragmatic, low-cost strategies tailored to SMEs, emphasizing flexible work arrangements, leadership training, and creating psychologically safe environments. These strategies are specifically designed to enhance both employee wellbeing and business outcomes.

This guide translates complex mental health concepts into straightforward actions that Czech business owners and managers can implement immediately, regardless of company size or available resources.

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Mental health, as defined by the WHO, is directly related to the work environment

The World Health Organisation (WHO) conceptualised mental well-being as **a state where the individual is able to understand his abilities, cope with normal life stressors, work productively, understand his abilities, and contribute productively to the community.** Mental health and well-being are broad concepts with a primary focus on the health of the workforce. Certain workplace factors, such as shift work, work demands, and work stress, can put an employee at higher risk of mental problems.

Poor mental health and lower well-being of the workers can lead to lower employee satisfaction, lower work performance, burnout, and increased risk of occupational hazards.

Investing in Mental Health is a strategic business decision that enhances productivity, reduces costs, and improves corporate reputation

$1T
Global Productivity Loss
Annual cost of depression and anxiety to the global economy according to WHO (World Health Organization)

35%
Productivity Reduction
Decrease in productivity for employees with unresolved depression

$4
Return on Investment
For every dollar invested in mental health interventions, according to WEF (World Economic Forum)

22%
Profitability Increase
Companies with high employee engagement show 22 % higher profitability

SMEs recognise the need for resilient teams, but they face many challenges, particularly related to limited budgets and team capacity

Wellbeing programs are too expensive

Reality: Many effective actions cost little or nothing – flexible working hours, open-door policies, and regular wellbeing check-ins can be implemented with minimal investment but significant impact.

Talking about mental health makes problems worse

Reality: Open communication actually reduces stigma and encourages early intervention, preventing issues from escalating and creating a more supportive environment.

Only large companies can support mental health

Reality: Even small businesses can create a big impact with simple actions like personal conversations, flexible work arrangements, and mental health days.

Mental health is a private matter

Reality: Employers directly impact stress levels and working conditions – supporting mental health is an essential aspect of responsible leadership.

Our toolkit offers a simple, practical starting point tailored to the SME business environment.

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Insights were drawn from a broad employee survey and conversations with HR representatives across sectors

Bilingual Survey – Online Questionnaire

Distributed via LinkedIn and direct mailing in both English and Czech to ensure accessibility and broad participation across diverse industries.

Data Collection

Gathered over 100 responses focusing on current practices, employee experiences, and perceived effectiveness of mental health initiatives.

HR Interviews

Conducted in-depth discussions with HR representatives from three large companies operating in Prague to understand current initiatives and best practices.

Analysis & Synthesis

Combined quantitative survey data with qualitative interview insights to develop comprehensive, practical recommendations for SMEs.

Our methodology combines wide-ranging survey data to identify patterns across various business landscape with detailed interviews that provided context and nuance about implementation challenges and successes.

Employee survey reveals mental health is still underestimated in SMEs, with a particular lack of structured support (EAPs, trainings, or policies)

Flexible Working Arrangements dominating mental health initiatives

- 72 % respondents´ companies implemented flexi time or occasional remote work.
- 44 % respondents confirmed that their companies provide Mental health awareness training for their employees, and 32 % respondents´ companies provide Free or subsidised counselling/therapy.
- 22 % respondents confirmed availability of Additional days off for mental health.
- **17 % respondents reported that their company does not offer any mental health initiatives.** These are employees of SMEs.

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are mostly found in larger companies, but rare in SMEs

- EAPs are less common mental practice, mostly implemented in large companies that offer more comprehensive mental health support.
- Only a small fraction of SME employees reported having access to an EAP or on-call psychologist.

Survey findings reveal a significant perception gap between what companies provide and what employees actually experience

Mental Health Culture

The **average rating of mental health culture at surveyed workplaces** is approximately 3.0 out of 5, indicating significant room for improvement across organisations.
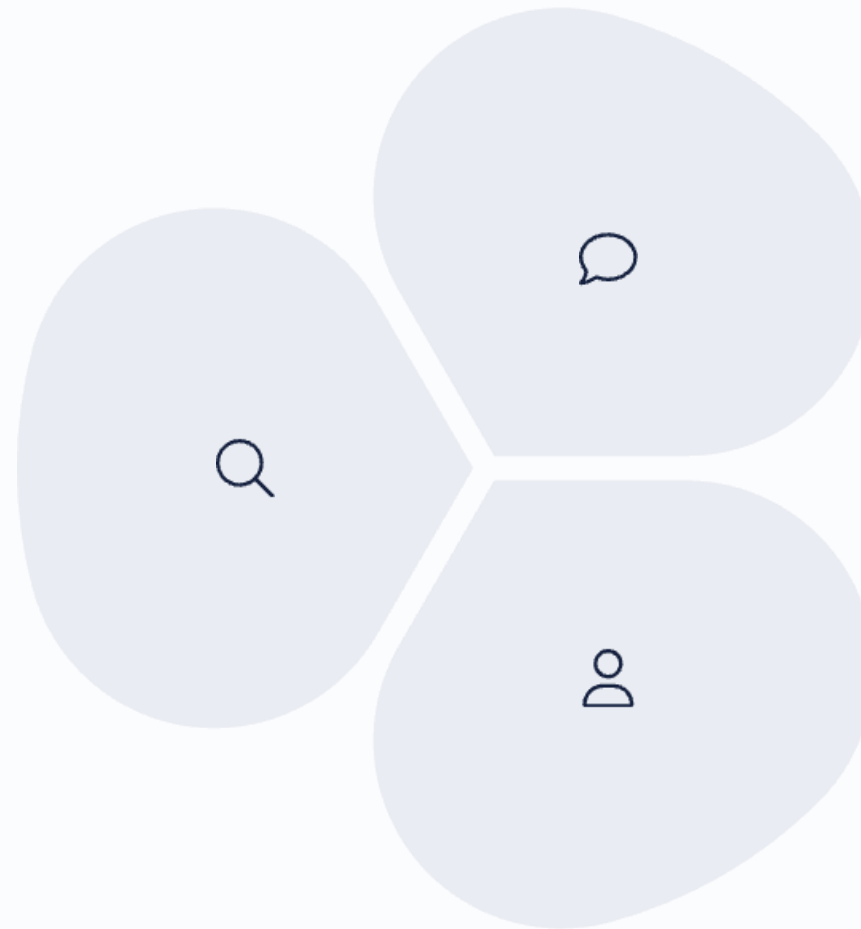
Comfort Discussing Mental Health

Only 24 % feel very comfortable discussing mental health with their manager, while 36 % feel somewhat comfortable. A concerning 40 % report feeling uncomfortable, suggesting substantial barriers to open dialogue.

Perceived Employer Commitment

51 % feel their company cares somewhat about mental health but sees room for improvement, 32 % believe their company doesn't prioritise mental health at all, and **only 18 % report that mental wellbeing is a genuine priority**.

The discomfort with mental health discussions highlights the persistent stigma that must be addressed through cultural and communication changes.

Survey indicates that SMEs should start with flexible work arrangements as they are both highly valued and relatively easy to implement. The significant gap in comfort levels when discussing mental health points to the critical need for manager training and culture-building efforts to reduce stigma and create psychological safety

Expand Support Services
Improve access to EAPs and counselling with awareness campaigns

Flexible Work as Baseline
Maintain or expand flexible arrangements as the foundation of mental health support

Build Trust Culture
Normalise mental health conversations to reduce stigma

Train Managers and Staff
Implement regular mental health awareness and leadership training

All interviewed companies recognise mental wellbeing as essential to productivity, retention, and workplace satisfaction, despite differences in implementation approaches

Key Similarities

Employee-centric approach prioritising wellbeing

Diverse initiatives including Health Days and workshops

Transparent, multi-channel **communication**

Strong **feedback culture** through surveys and discussions

Acknowledgment of **measurement challenges**

Key Differences

Strategy Structure: From data-driven approaches with partnerships to more personal, grassroots initiatives

Accessibility: Range from flexible formats and cafeteria-style benefits to uniform activities for all staff

Leadership Involvement: Varying levels of manager training and leadership engagement in wellbeing culture

Best Practices for SMEs

Start with simple, low-cost actions like open-door HR policies

Build partnerships with NGOs or mental health experts

Create safe spaces **by normalising mental health discussions**

Utilise existing channels for sharing resources

Offer flexibility in how employees engage with wellbeing content

Internal surveys conducted by the interviewed companies reveal that employees value psychological safety and flexibility in mental health support, with a strong emphasis on normalising help-seeking behaviours and tailoring support to individual needs

What Stress Triggers Companies Reported

High seasonal workload leading to exhaustion and absenteeism

Burnout and isolation, especially post-COVID

Increasing pressure from news, digital overload, and global uncertainty

Emotional strain in sales and customer service roles

How Companies Respond to Reported Triggers

Mindfulness sessions for resilience and focus

Confidential counselling for personal and family issues

Themed "Healthy Days" addressing burnout, digital detox, stress management

Open-door HR policy and peer-level support networks

Flexibility in working hours and benefit usage

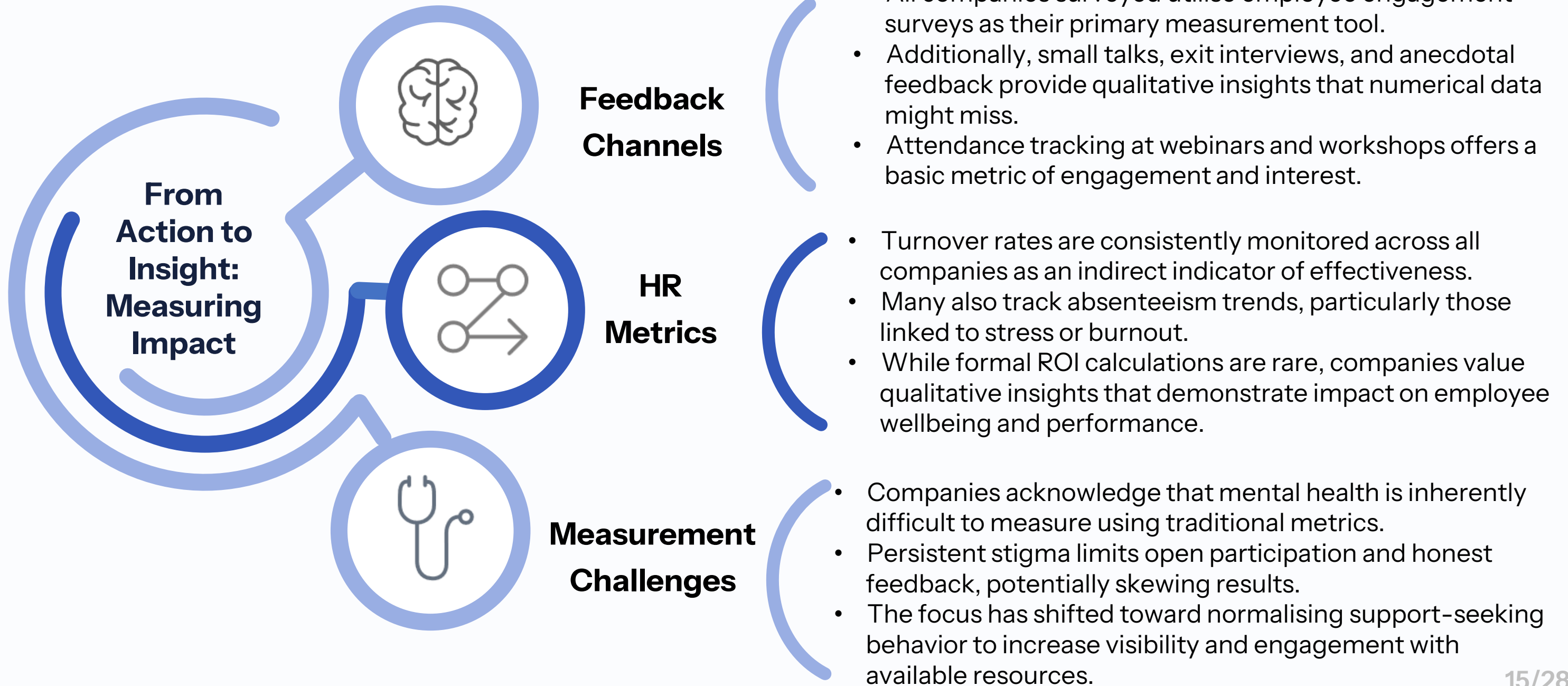## What Employees Need More Of

Safe spaces to ask for help without stigma

Continued access to diverse resources (webinars, recorded content)

Leadership visibility and empathy in mental health discussions

Customisable wellbeing options for individual preferences and schedules

Evaluating the success of mental health initiatives is a challenging discipline. Pick a few metrics that matter most and track them consistently

From Action to Insight: Measuring Impact

Feedback Channels

- All companies surveyed utilise employee engagement surveys as their primary measurement tool.
- Additionally, small talks, exit interviews, and anecdotal feedback provide qualitative insights that numerical data might miss.
- Attendance tracking at webinars and workshops offers a basic metric of engagement and interest.

HR Metrics

- Turnover rates are consistently monitored across all companies as an indirect indicator of effectiveness.
- Many also track absenteeism trends, particularly those linked to stress or burnout.
- While formal ROI calculations are rare, companies value qualitative insights that demonstrate impact on employee wellbeing and performance.

Measurement Challenges

- Companies acknowledge that mental health is inherently difficult to measure using traditional metrics.
- Persistent stigma limits open participation and honest feedback, potentially skewing results.
- The focus has shifted toward normalising support-seeking behavior to increase visibility and engagement with available resources.

As the workplace continues to evolve, companies that proactively address mental wellbeing will gain competitive advantages in recruitment, retention, and productivity

Future Trends in Workplace Mental Health

Personalised wellbeing programs leveraging wearable health technology

Gamification elements to boost engagement with wellbeing initiatives

Continued emphasis on manager training as the cornerstone of effective support

Greater focus on diversity, equity and inclusion in mental health access

Hybrid work arrangements and flexibility becoming standard wellbeing infrastructure

Key Takeaways

Mental health is a business-critical issue, not a soft topic

Start small: simple policies can have significant emotional impact

Partner with experts—you don't have to develop everything internally

Culture shift begins with leadership normalising support-seeking

Call to Action and Reco for SMEs

Review your current practices, identify gaps in your mental health support system, and pilot at least one low-cost initiative based on the recommendations in this guide.

Measure the results and refine your approach based on employee feedback.

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Start with small steps, and create visible impact

Recognise the Need

Mental health initiatives aren't just nice-to-haves—they're essential business investments that impact productivity, retention, and overall company performance.

Start Simple

Begin with low-cost, high-impact changes that can be implemented quickly. These initial steps establish momentum and demonstrate commitment.

Build Consistently

Develop a sustainable approach by gradually expanding your mental health initiatives based on employee feedback and observed results.

Your practical guide starts with actionable strategies that acknowledge your resource constraints while maximising positive impacts on your workforce.

Share useful resources for your employees

Crisis Support

Mental health helplines provide immediate assistance for urgent situations. These services should be prominently displayed in your workplace and included in employee resources.

- National crisis intervention lines
- Regional support centers
- Emergency mental health services

Professional Services

Connect with consultants and platforms specialising in workplace mental health. These experts can provide tailored support.

- Wellbeing consultants
- Mental health platforms
- Specialised SME advisors

Educational Materials

Make relevant articles, training tools, templates and guides easily accessible to your team. Consider creating QR codes linking to these resources for convenient access.

- Wellbeing frameworks
- Mental health research
- Policy templates

Ensure these resources are visible and easily accessible through multiple channels, including your intranet, physical bulletin boards, and regular communication materials. Periodically review and update the information to maintain relevance.

Build a culture of trust and transparency and normalise mental health discussions

Why It Matters

Employees must feel heard and supported to perform and thrive at their best. A foundation of **trust creates the psychological safety** needed for people to bring their whole selves to work.

How To Do It

Establish a strict **open door policy** and designate at least one 'go-to' person with **strong empathy and communication skills**. Leaders should regularly demonstrate vulnerability by **sharing their own challenges** and successes.

SMEs Tip

"Nothing is more cringy and demotivating than when a manager always says 'do not hesitate to contact me anytime,' while always being too busy for their team members." **Model the behaviour you want to see.**

Remember that building this culture requires time, potentially some training budget, and most importantly, the right mindset from leadership. Your authenticity as a leader sets the tone for the entire organisation.

Encourage meaningful conversations

Regular Check-Ins

Schedule consistent one-on-ones that go beyond work tasks to include wellbeing discussions.

Wellbeing Related Events (Health Day, team building activities, regular team breakfast, etc.)

Create low/no-cost gatherings where colleagues can develop deeper connections.

Awareness Initiatives

Use internal resources as ambassadors to lead mental health awareness projects.

Appreciation Practices

Implement simple recognition activities like gratitude boards or appreciation cards.

When team members connect beyond work tasks, they develop deeper understanding and support for each other. This creates a foundation for better collaboration and increased psychological safety across the organisation.

Conduct Effective Management Training

Recognise Importance
Managers are often the first point of contact for employees in distress. Their ability to respond appropriately is crucial for early intervention.

Provide Professional Training
Equip managers with certified training in empathetic communication and appropriate boundary setting.

Designate Ambassadors
Appoint experienced, empathetic individuals as mental health ambassadors to provide additional support.

Schedule Regular Refreshers
Maintain knowledge through ongoing training and feedback loops to ensure continued effectiveness.

"Be careful to put more empathetic people in management roles," advises one SME leader. "The good will is there, but there needs to be more awareness at the top." Effective implementation requires time allocation for training and a budget for professional development.

Utilise Available Training Resources

Certified Mental Health Instructor

Comprehensive certification program for €495 per person. Provides managers with fundamental mental health knowledge and response strategies.

Workplace Options Manager Assist

Specialised programme focusing on equipping managers with tools to support employee wellbeing and handle difficult situations effectively.

Red Cross Mental Health Training

Respected program available at £311 per person, covering awareness, intervention techniques, and creating supportive environments.

Free Online Resources

Platforms like Alison offer free self-paced courses that can supplement formal training or provide options for businesses with limited budgets.

When selecting training, focus on meaningful, practical programs rather than "tick box" exercises. The right training empowers managers to create psychologically safe environments and respond appropriately to mental health concerns.

Enhance or Implement Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)

Why It Matters

Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provides confidential external resources supporting employee well-being at no cost to them. These programmes offer counseling, coaching, and practical support for various life and work challenges.
AEP provides a route to professional help. It´s important and can become a game-changer for employees dealing with serious stress, and it underlines the employer's commitment.

How To Do It

1. Assess current support landscape and understand what is available and what is needed
2. Choose the Right EAP Provider, create awareness and engagement strategies
3. Design a Communication Plan
4. Train Managers and HR Champions to support the programme
5. Constantly monitor, evaluate & improve

SMEs Tip

Many EAP providers offer packages suitable for SMEs (some have pay-per-use models or affordable flat rates for small teams).
If an EAP is still beyond budget, an alternative is establishing a relationship with a local psychologist or counselor.

"*Once our leaders started openly endorsing the EAP, uptake doubled. It made it okay to ask for help.*" (anonymous manager)

An effective EAP helps improve employee well-being, reduce absenteeism, and enhance productivity.

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Mental wellbeing is a journey, not a checkbox...

Engage Expert Support (EAP or similar)
Partner with external resources as needed

Train Leaders
Equip managers with necessary skills and mindsets

Build Your Ambassador Team
Engage internal champions to drive initiatives

Launch Quick & Visible Actions
Implement immediate initiatives to build momentum

Understand Your Starting Point
Map current state and identify key stressors

MONITOR & EVALUATE & IMPROVE

As you implement each step, remember to measure and adapt based on employee feedback, participation rates, and relevant HR metrics. Communicate results using a "You Said – We Did" approach to demonstrate responsiveness and commitment.

Start Small. Care Deeply. Lead Well.

1

2X

100%

Start Today

Begin with just one initiative. Even the smallest action signals your commitment to mental wellbeing.

Double Impact

Small steps in mental health initiatives **create disproportionately positive effects** in SMEs due to the current low baseline.

Complete Commitment

Authentic leadership requires genuine care, not just implementing programmes. Your personal engagement makes the difference.

Our survey indicates that the current level of mental wellbeing initiatives in SMEs provide an excellent opportunity for meaningful impact. Every step taken, even a small one, can produce significant positive outcomes for your employees and organization. Remember that your authentic leadership in this area will resonate deeply with your team.

We appreciate your commitment to creating a mentally healthy workplace

Thank You!

Q&A

SESSION

Questionnaire – respondents' demography

Gender split:
- 59 %   female
- 41 %   male

Age:
- 77 %   >31 years old

Education:
- 81 %   university degree

Company information:
- 71 %   >250 employees
- 53 %   >1 000 employees
- 76 %   Prague based